



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

In Memoriam Edwin Morgan

Citation for published version:

Jamieson, A 2010, 'In Memoriam Edwin Morgan', *Bella Caledonia*.
<<http://bellacaledonia.org.uk/2010/08/23/in-memoriam-edwin-morgan-1920-2010>>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Bella Caledonia

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Jamieson, A. (2010). In Memoriam Edwin Morgan. Bella Caledonia.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



By **Robert Alan Jamieson**

In a life of 90 years, a degree of transformation is to be expected, as times a-change and people must respond. In Edwin Morgan's, sheer constancy of place, work and passion is remarkable. One city, one job and one great project, he seemed to remain essentially unaltered by the tides that swung around him, the impish mischievous curious boy he must have been still evident right into his final years. But from this fixed fact of his life, there roamed the most flexible and responsive mind, a fiery intellect flickering in the breeze of any new technology or idea to pass nearby.

Glasgow between the wars – still the great Second City of Empire, industrious and mercantile in the extreme, with no great tradition of literature – was not the most obviously nurturing of places for any 'lissinin boy', yet he found what he needed there. His early passion for reading led him to persuade his parents to furnish him with access to book clubs and, later, the ivory towers of Gilmorehill provided the perfect environment for its furtherance. Now, the panoramic views from the university buildings on the hilltop, across the Clyde to the southern city, seem to me to conjure Morgan's personal vision, his deep empathetic understanding of the range of lives playing out there – as if in a flickering slideshow of Marzaroli monochromes.



Scotland during these years was in the grip of the poetic imagination as it has not been for many long decades, with Chris Grieve's wilful acts of cultural revivification, and personal reinvention as 'Hugh MacDiarmid' for the public's consumption. To be a poet, as a social function and not a hobby, must have seemed quite possible to those likely lads – and lasses – growing up then, to Morgan and close contemporaries such as Norman MacCaig (b.1912) W.S. Graham (b.1918), Hamish Henderson (b.1919), George Mackay Brown (b.1921), Ian Hamilton Finlay (b.1925) and Iain Crichton Smith (b.1928).

And of course, 'MacDiarmid' would remain the father figure to be challenged, if not killed outright, for decades to come – the authority whose opinion mattered most. Morgan was a fan of the later MacDiarmid, his 'poetry of fact', but the gentle and not so gentle teasing of the older poet by Finlay (e.g. his 'Mansie Considers the Sea in the Manner of Hugh MacDiarmid' in *The Dancers Inherit the Party*) and Morgan's association with him in the vanguard of the Concrete Poetry movement in the early 60s, led the surrogate father to condemn both. In a letter to Maurice Lindsay, who was putting together an anthology, MacDiarmid states that: "Morgan's prominence in connection with 'Concrete Poetry' and with Ian Hamilton Finlay rules him out completely as far as I am concerned," while in 1970 he points out, in his authoritative way, that the playful urban West Coast Scots employed in Finlay's 1961 *Glasgow Beasts an a Burd* (and later, by Morgan and others, notably Tom Leonard) "is not the kind of Scots in which high poetry can be written, and what can be done in it ... is qualitatively little, if at all, above Kailyard level." (Letters 687). So the famous painting by Sandy Moffat depicting those younger poets circling the master in Milne's Bar, often criticised for its inclusion of Morgan on the grounds that he was rarely there, is not just circumstantially mistaken. It also rather misrepresents the complex reality of their intellectual relationship.

But if Morgan's place within Scottish poetry at this time was fraught and difficult, the wider world was offering many good things, such as the Brazilian venture into things concrete which MacDiarmid so hated, and the 'new' American poetry, codified by Donald Allen's seminal anthology of 1960. By gathering together the work of the Beats for the first time, and most importantly, the tailpieces which poets had been asked to provide outlining their method, 'The New American Poetry' crystallised the philosophical basis for this new work. And this book was linked to a much earlier influence on Morgan's view of poetry, via the New York academic who had inspired Ginsberg and Kerouac and many others: Mark Van Doren.

The now infamous 1962 writers' conference in the McEwan Hall, Edinburgh, organised by John Calder and friends, when the original Glasgow Beat Alex Trocchi returned home in inimitable style and at which William S Burroughs first grabbed the world's attention, brought this new wave crashing into Scotland. MacDiarmid's version of culture found itself challenged as it had not been before. Edwin was hugely excited by all this, and it seemed to confirm that a great change was taking place in the very transmission of poetry, away from literature as dead text in a specially refined language of its own, towards something more human and life-affirming, as we can sense from his reportage:

"The poem is jumping off the printed page into the gramophone record and the concert hall, and with it goes the poet. Performance – the poet's voice – becomes significant instead of being a mere curiosity. The concept of a living and reacting audience revives. Qualities weakened for centuries – vibrance and warmth, immediacy, tonal indication, subtlety of emphasis – are being regained ... this is life entering again through the ear."

The young Morgan was every bit as open to the world as the older, judging by the diary he kept of his reading, and a crucial discovery in these years was Van Doren's 1928 anthology of world poetry – this was a point of connection between us, we realised when we met. Van Doren's hugely successful volume – so much so that he and his wife bought their first house on its royalties – gathers, via various translations, a vast range of poetic tradition and form into a single book. I like to think that the wonderful work Morgan went on to do as a translator has its seed in the day, in Rutherglen, when he first opened Van Doren's opus. But whatever, as a source of inspiration for an apprentice poet, it has rarely if ever been bettered, and here the young Eddie found his mind liberated from the narrower traditions of his education and home culture, just as I did when I happened across a second-hand copy some forty years later – a book that demonstrates poetry can be many things, and about many things – and variety, of course, is a hallmark of Morgan's own great oeuvre. Indeed, it has sometimes been a criticism of his work that he has no fixed 'identifiable' voice in the way that, say, MacCaig has, and that his work sometimes seems to lose impact in its concern with the ephemeral, minor news events or other trivia: "too many surfaces, too much shape-changing, not enough steady focus," as Alasdair Macrae put it in the Scottish Review of Books. But this wide-ranging quality IS in fact his hallmark – the multi-vocal, the multi-formal, the desire to give everything attention, not just the 'Big Bangs' but the meanest or smallest too: 'The not quite nothing I write it I praise it', as he himself phrases it, in 'Fires'. As readers we may not be able to point to a specific place or great theme within literature and say, "There, see Morgan!", but that is because he has been, poetically, everywhere, 'sweeping out the dark'.

I recall a dinner in Glasgow City Chambers in 1999, to celebrate his investiture as the city's Poet Laureate. I was, at the time, writer-in-residence at Glasgow and Strathclyde universities. It was quite an intimate affair, just those of us then working in the literary field in the city, but the organisers had clearly thought about the occasion as they'd borrowed from the Hunterian various literary paintings to adorn the room. Judging by his brief stumbling speech, the then Provost, Alex Mosson, didn't know a great deal about poetry, though he was obviously proud that the great city in his stewardship contained such an eminent practitioner – he kinda told us he was glad the boy done good.

In response, Eddie read a topical Glasgow poem he'd written the previous week, his first, as I recall, as Laureate, later published as 'A Plea'. It was, he told us, a response to a news item which informed us stocks were so low in a Glasgow sperm-bank that imports had to be brought in from Denmark. Beneath Augustus John's celebrated portrait of W.B. Yeats, Eddie the swotty-but-naughty schoolboy concluded with an exhortation to Glasgow's men: "Think o yon near-impotent bank / Grit yer teeth and gie it a wank."

It was a glorious moment of perfect inappropriateness. Provost Mosson's chain-bedecked self-importance froze into uncertainty. But the rest of us laughed, at his red face as much as the poem – including, I think, old Yeats on the wall. It was as if Eddie was saying to Glasgow, 'Fair enough, you want me to represent you, and I will, but take me as I am – I will not be a simple praise-singer at your official functions.' A message reiterated, in a way, by the poem of his that Liz Lochhead read, for the dawn of the reconvened Scottish Parliament. Skalds can and should scold, be playful, and not merely eulogize.

By the time he gave the Provost that red face in the City Chambers, Eddie had been 'out', publically, for nine years, following the revelations in 'About Edwin Morgan' (1990). For someone who had spent the first seventy years of his life shielding a secret that could have caused himself and his loved ones great harm had it been revealed, this new-found freedom to be himself, without veiling his true nature, must have been almost unbelievable, and he must have wondered, was it really safe, after so long? He knew well the dangers. Glasgow University had offered sanctuary for his bookishness from the harshness of the streets, and to have lost that safety through some careless act or gossip could have cast him far from this refuge. But Scotland had indeed changed around him, become a place better suited to an open, gay (in both the old and new senses) way of life, a place where he could live and speak freely without fear of censure or loss.

It is a moot point to what extent this need for secrecy gave rise to a reticence that wasn't native to him, and may thus have delayed emergence as the great poet he latterly became. His race was already more than half-run by the time his first major book, 'The Second Life', appeared in 1968, by which time many of those contemporaries had already long-staked a claim on greatness. Graham, MacCaig and Henderson were all far down the road by then, lauded and applauded, and seemed much more likely candidates for the laurel crown when MacDiarmid finally gave it up. Even younger poets such as Mackay Borwn, Crichton Smith and Hamilton Finlay were more advanced in terms of their visibility.

This delay meant that Morgan was often more readily grouped with a younger set of poets, as in Blackie's 'A Sense of Belonging: Six Scottish Poets of the Seventies' (1977), where his work appears alongside that of Stewart Conn, Douglas Dunn, Tom Leonard, Liz Lochhead and William McIlvanney – all young enough to his poetic children. This book, which became a key classroom fixture for a time, helped to bring about his prominence in Scottish education, which no doubt assisted greatly in creating a fan-base among younger Scots – some of those becoming creative collaborators in time, like Tommy Smith and Roddy Woomble. Proof, perhaps, of the importance of the classroom in creating the very possibility of cultural connection and transference between generations, by engendering a sense of familiarity, as well as the literacy which the poetic art grows out of.

So, in many ways, those 90 years are a tale of permanency, of unbroken residence and intent, yet the reach of the mind is multi-faceted and circumnavigatory. The boy never lost his wonder, and just as lightning precedes thunder, wonder precedes writing. His intellectual desire to wander was never compromised by staying put – Glasgow was simply the fixed compass foot, as in Donne's 'A Valediction: forbidding mourning', to which the wandering foot always returns, which gave the wanderer its bearing. Farewell, Eddie, we loved you – and, I'm happy to say, we know you knew that.

[About these ads](#)

Share this:

<input type="checkbox"/> Print	<input type="checkbox"/> Reddit	<input type="checkbox"/> Google	<input type="checkbox"/> Email	<input type="checkbox"/> LinkedIn	<input type="checkbox"/> Digg	<input type="checkbox"/> Facebook 12	<input type="checkbox"/> Twitter 3	<input type="checkbox"/> StumbleUpon
<input type="checkbox"/> Tumblr	<input type="checkbox"/> Pinterest							

Categories: [Commentary](#) , [Poetry](#) Tags: [Alan Jamieson](#) , [Edwin Morgan](#)

RELATED ARTICLES



An Eye for an Aye?



Dragons and Poodles



From The Province of the Cat #26: Killing Squirrels With A Howitzer



Better Together: Proud to Fail



The Better Together Campaign Crisis



Aperitivo!